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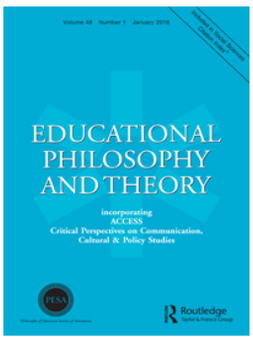

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"The Source of Learning is Thought" Reading the *Chin-ssu lu* (近思錄) with a "Western Eye"

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Abstract

The contribution focuses on Neo-Confucian texts as collected by Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130–1200) and Lü Zuqian (1137–1181) and is a look from the 'outside', from the perspective of German theories of Bildung ('self-cultivation'). It aims at demonstrating that among other insights that today's readers may gather from Neo-Confucian literature, one aspect protrudes from others: that learning can be considered as a virtue—even a meta-virtue—a form of life and mode of self-formation of the person. It does not seem exaggerated, from this perspective, to state that Neo-Confucian philosophy is—to a large extent—a philosophy of learning and self-transformation which offers fruitful irritants for questioning the widespread habits of thinking about skills and their development in today's strong and problematic discourses and corresponding educational policies.

Keywords: Neo-Confucianism, learning, Chin-ssu lu, Confucianist learning theory, Chu Hsi

> Without learning there will be no means
> of entering Tao. The efforts in becoming a sage
> or a worthy lie completely in learning.
> After knowing the road to follow,
> and getting in the right direction to advance,
> we can speak about learning
> (Chu Hsi, 1991, p. 73).

Preliminary Remarks

Among the various insights that today's readers may gather from Confucian (and especially Neo-Confucian) literature, one aspect seems to protrude from others: that learning can be considered as a virtue—even a *meta*-virtue—a form of life and mode of self-formation of the person. It does not seem exaggerated to state that Neo-Confu-

cian philosophy is—to a large extent—a philosophy of learning and self-transformation which offers a great opportunity for critical reflections on today's rather superficial and instrumentalist understanding of learning.

The influence of Confucian thinking and pertinent concepts has been marginal in the German history of educational thought. This somewhat contrasts with its impact on German philosophy, whose exponents—on not so rare occasions, at least—have referred to the work and life of Confucius. Confucius, according to German philosopher Karl Jaspers, is one of the four most influential human beings in the world history of thought (cf. Jaspers, 1964). But in contrast to the other three 'big names'—Socrates, Buddha, and Jesus—Confucius left written works to posterity. Unfortunately perhaps, they have not yet been authenticated. Nevertheless, being aware of the importance of and focus on learning and the idea of self-transformation in Confucian thinking, it remains more than just surprising that reference to the Chinese tradition has been rather spare in German thinking (as well as in other European language cultures and educational discourses). Even worse, the superficial image of Confucius is that of a moralizing father figure whose anecdotes and locutions are collected in little phrase books suitable as gifts for special social occasions but probably not taken seriously in the academic context—outside the Sinology departments, of course. The public reception of Confucius—in contrast to Jesus, Buddha, and Socrates—may even show some clownish streaks. Therefore, the importance of Confucian institutes all over the world seems obvious.

In the following pages, I will have a look at Neo-Confucian texts as collected by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Lü Zuqian (1137–1181).[1] It is a modest look from the 'outside', from the perspective of German theories of *Bildung* ('self-cultivation'). It is interesting, on one the hand, to focus on parallels of humanistic concepts of learning and education while examining the much older thoughts and insights as presented in the Neo-Confucian texts named above on the other. A crucial difficulty in both cases is the problem of differentiating between normative and descriptive aspects or statements in Neo-Confucian notions as well as in humanistic concepts of learning and self-transformation. I will focus on (what I would like to call) the *ethos* of learning rather than the role and importance of morality in Confucian thinking (cf. Ivanhoe, 1993) and Zhu Xi's moral psychology (cf. Shun, 2010). This may occur due to a (personal) lack of insight, but, by reading the *Chin-ssu lu,* one might develop the impression that it is not implausible to reconstruct Neo-Confucian perspectives on learning (in some respects, at least) by noting the concepts of negativity and negative morality which border on the 'aporetic' style of Socratic thinking (as presented in the earlier phase of Plato's work). And it remains striking that Confucius and Socrates lived at about the same period of time (Socrates 469–399 BC, Confucius 551–479 BC). However, I am unfortunately not in a position to fulfill this interesting task. Rather I will focus on the idea of '*learning by thinking*' which demands epistemic virtues—most of all modesty in evaluating one's own knowledge, which is an ethos of learning.

With such a concept ('ethos'), the problem of the entangling cognitive and ethical aspects cannot be resolved; I am aware of this, and I know that this is less than what a 'pure analytical' view can accept. Nevertheless, the possible 'accusation' (or

misinterpretation)—according to which Neo-Confucian thoughts on learning are mainly ways to moralize the topic—can be rejected.

Yet the study of Neo-Confucian texts on learning seems to offer fruitful irritants for questioning the widespread habits of thinking about skills and their development in today's strong and problematic discourses and corresponding educational policies.

The Chin-ssu lu

The *Chin-ssu lu* is a collection of Neo-Confucian thoughts on metaphysics, ethics, reading and literature, and government. It also reflects on Chinese history and its heterodox systems, Buddhism and Taoism. Wing-Tsit Chan calls the *Chin-ssu lu* 'Neo-Confucianism in a nutshell' and explains: 'Since it is the forerunner and model of the Hsing-li ta-ch'üan [*Great collection of Neo-Confucianism*] which was the standard text covering Chinese thoughts for 500 years, its tremendous influence on Chinese philosophy can easily be imagined' (Chin-ssu lu, 1967, ix). Whereas Wang Yang-ming's *Instructions on the Practical Living* represents the major work of the *idealistic* wing of Neo-Confucianism, according to Wing-Tsit Chan, the *Chin-ssu lu* is the major work of the *rationalistic* wing of Neo-Confucianism. 'It is no exaggeration to say (…)', he continues, 'that it has been the most important book in China for the last 750 years' (ix). Only a fraction of the Neo-Confucian works had been translated into Western languages up to the 1960's. The translation of the *Chin-ssu lu* (to Wing-Tsit Chan, at least) was 'imperative' and 'long overdue'. The 1967 translation includes many comments by Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scholars. Another reader on (and of) Zhu Xi, 'Further Reflections on Things at Hand', was published in 1991.

The *Chin-ssu lu* was written and compiled in 1175 during the Song dynasty (960–1279), almost 17 centuries after the *Lunyu*. De Bary writes in '*Principle and Practicality: Essay in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning*' (edited in 1979 by Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom) about the Song dynasty:

> Despite their access to power and the benevolent patronage of Song rulers, the Song Confucians had encountered human limitations in the executing of their grand designs. (…) Chu Hsi (Zhu Xi), in the twelfth century, readjusted and reordered his human priorities. The consequence was his intensification of the effort to articulate Neo-Confucian metaphysics and to develop a practical system of spiritual and intellectual cultivation, centering on the ideal of the sage …. (De Bary, 1979, p. 10)

In this process, Neo-Confucianism developed features with strong resemblances to later European Renaissance and its central topics such as

> the dignity of man, the immortality of the soul, and the unity of truth. Each of these has a close counterpart in the central doctrines of Neo-Confucianism. Though the second theme is expressed in terms quite different from Confucianism, e.g. immortality of the soul, the Neo-Confucians had a religious or mystical view of the self as united with all creation in such a way as to transcend its finite limitations. This is found most characteristically in Neo-Confucian accounts of attaining sage-hood as an experience of

> realizing the true self, based on the doctrine that 'humaneness unites man with Heaven-and-Earth and all things'. (De Bary, 1979, p. 10–11)

In the Chinese case, de Bary explains, on the one hand, the

> reaffirmation of humane values took on a special quality as a reaction against Buddhism; on the other, certain characteristic features of Neo-Confucianism showed the influence of Buddhism. The net result, then, was a humanistic revival which did not so much result in a decline of spirituality as in a transformation of it. (p. 7)

Be it this or another way, it may seem appropriate to say that this resembles the Renaissance return to a classical heritage in the eleventh-century revival and restoration of Confucianism.

East–West comparisons: A Note on Simplistic Dichotomies, and the Request to Doubt

Also Western non-experts in Confucianism, non-sinologists, and people fully ignorant of Chinese history and language, may today feel quite comfortable in the lecture on the *Chin-ssu lu*, the more *rationalistic* wing of Neo-Confucianism, which offers striking resemblances to some aspects of the *Bildung* idea. The German notion of *Bildung* is usually traced back to Eckhart von Hochheim (known as 'Meister Eckhart'), who lived from 1260 to 1328 and was quite an influential theologian and philosopher of the late Middle Age. The concept of *Bildung* is of *theological* and *spiritual* origins, not mainly a concept of Enlightenment rationality, as it is sometimes interpreted in a rather reductionist manner.

Whenever it comes to the notion of the *self* and the notion of *rationality*, some authors feel quite tempted to make rather dualistic and simple statements or comparisons between Eastern and Western thoughts. This may be to keep things simple. But it may be politically motivated or derived from pure ignorance, or reflect a desire to establish certainties in matters of cultural identity and heritage. Whatever the source or motives may be, such dualistic propositions are not convincing, while being historically ranked as philosophically untenable. Unfortunately, one comes across many such simplistic East–West dualisms and dichotomies.[2] It's a wonder how the authors could develop such 'great' overviews and feel so certain that they were capable of comparing *the* Confucian tradition with *the* Western tradition. Doubt, of course, was not invented by René Descartes. As we know, it had already played a major role in the Socratic tradition. One may read in the *Chin-ssu lu*: 'The student must first of all know how to doubt' (Chin-ssu lu, III, 15, [1967, p. 94]). Neither the Socratic nor the Confucian tradition is a homogenous body of thought, insights, inspirations, and questions. Those who enter such a tradition gain a contact with an entire *universe*, not just a simple body of anecdotes and phrases. You do not compare universes! If one could compare universes, one might dispense with doubts and questions. Even worse, one would not have started to study the universe at all:

> People who do not doubt simply have not been devoted to concrete practice. If they have concretely practiced, there must be some doubts. Something must be impracticable, and that raises questions. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 102, [1967, p. 85])

Commenting on the Confucian tradition, one should be more or less familiar with 18 dynasties and their spiritual, religious, and political circumstances. Comments on Western thinking may also require pertinent insights into the history of thoughts from antiquity to postmodern times. But, of course, our lives are too short for such endeavors. We can only comfort ourselves with fragmented insights and get in touch with the universe of the unknowns. Yet our ambitions should not be too modest:

> It is very important that a student should not have a small ambition or to be flippant. If his ambition is small, he will be easily satisfied. If he is easily satisfied, there will be no way for him to advance. Being flippant, he will think that he already knows what he does not yet know and that he has studied what he has not yet studied. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 111, [1967, p. 87])

In quoting this passage, of course, I implicitly refer not only to Confucius but also to Socrates. To become educated means to learn what one does not know.

> We must try to know what we do not yet know, and to correct what is not good in us, however little. This is the improvement of our moral nature. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 94, [1967, p. 83])

Knowing about what one does *not* know is neither a sign of ignorance nor indifference but rather the starting point of learning. To make not-knowing explicit is an expression of thinking and insight. This major feature of a so-called negative pedagogy can already be found in the *Analects* (Lunyu) as well as in the Platonic reference to the aporetic side of Socrates. It remains striking how during the same era (in Greek antiquity and the Chunqiu dynasty) the figures of Socrates and Confucius articulate agnostic and negative wisdom—among other similarities (and, of course, important differences, see, e.g. Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

The Ethos and Love of Learning

A wonderful and well-known passage in *the Analects* concerns critical students. 'The Master said, Yan Hui was not any help to me, for he always accepted everything I said' (Lun yü, XI, 4, Confucius, 1979, p. 106). According to Paul (2006, 2010), Confucius expresses here that learning becomes more difficult if the learner fails to contradict or offer criticism—at least from time to time (Paul, 2010, p. 46). Learning is about thinking. You may be intelligent but not focus on thinking. On the other hand, you may be not so bright but familiar with the practice of thinking and studying.[3] That is important for self-cultivation, because 'the source of learning is thought' (Chin-ssu lu, III, 6, [1967, p. 90]).

The close connection between learning and thinking requires an effort to look for expressions that fit personal experiences:

> Whenever in our effort at thinking we come to something that cannot be expressed in words, we must think it over carefully and sift it clearly again and again. Only this can be considered skillful learning. As for Kao Tzu, whenever he came to something that could not be expressed in words, he would stop and inquire no more. (Chin-ssu lu, III, 22, [1967, p. 97])

Learning, for many students, is naturally no fun at all, and most students want to avoid the effort to think and learn or agree to learn only if it is smooth and easy. This is not a new phenomenon:

> Nowadays students study like people climbing a hill. As long as the path is unobstructed and leveled, they take long steps. When they reach a dangerous point, they stop right away. The thing to do is to be firm and determined and proceed with resolution and courage. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 53, [1967, p. 62])

There is no doubt that students—in this traditional view—can be clearly separated into at least two groups: students who possess the capacity to struggle and push themselves forward, and those who lack this disposition and virtue. 'Now as for persons with inferior capacity who wish to pursue learning at leisure and allow it to proceed wherever it pleases—I have never heard that such a person can succeed' (Chin-ssu lu, II, 92, [1967, p. 82]).

It is important to understand that the major motive for learning and thinking in the Confucian view is a special kind of *fondness* or *love*. 'If someone engages in idle speculation at home, and neither studies nor inquires, then he is already a normal commoner. That which gives a sage his sageliness is fondness for learning and inquiry from inferiors' (Chu Hsi 1991, p. 73). Learning, and the love of learning, can therefore be regarded as a sort of *meta-virtue* which forms the base and precondition of self-cultivation. This grand view is already expressed by Confucius himself:

> To love benevolence *ren*(仁) without loving learning is liable to lead to foolishness. To love cleverness without loving learning is liable to lead to deviation from the right path. To love trustworthiness in word without loving learning is liable to lead to harmful behavior. To love forthrightness without loving learning is liable to lead to intolerance. To love courage without loving learning is liable to lead to insubordination. To love unbending strength without loving learning is liable to lead to indiscipline. (Confucius, 1979, XVII, 8, pp. 144–145)

Personal dignity, self-respect, and social recognition—in this view—depend less on achieved skills than on effort (virtues) to change. The language of virtues is richer, for it includes people's willingness, desire, and motivation, not just as a necessary drive to acquire skills or act accordingly but as an inherent feature of human practice.

The ethos of learning is not just a willingness to push oneself forward in an obsessive way to gather knowledge and skills.

> People say we must practice with effort. Such a statement, however, is superficial. If a person really knows what a thing should be done, he does

> not need to wait for his will to be aroused. As soon as he artificially arouses will, that means selfishness. How can such a spirit last long? (Chin-ssu lu, II, 54, [1967, p. 63])

'Do what you must' serves as the maxim and ethos of learning; it stresses being ambitious without absolutely wanting to reach the target. Therefore, one could seek the 'pleasure of learning' or learning as a form of living.

> One who knows learning will surely love it. He who loves it will surely seek it. And he who seeks it will surely achieve it. The learning of the ancients is a lifetime affair. If in moments of haste and in times of difficulty or confusion one is devoted to it, how can one fail to achieve it? (Chin-ssu lu, II, 55, [1967, p. 63])

What was said in the section above may remind one—to some degree—of John Dewey's a-teleological theory of learning and education, the idea of learning without focusing on a target outside the process of learning. 'Master Ming-Tao said: In learning we must avoid setting up a target. If we go step by step without stop, we will succeed' (Chin-ssu lu, II, 74, [1967, p. 69]). In the further notes: Someone asked, 'In his endeavor, a student should aim at becoming a sage. Why not set up a target?' Zhu Xi answered:

> Of course a student should regard a sage as his teacher, but what need is there to set up a target? As soon as one sets up a target, his mind will be calculating and deliberating as when he will become a sage and what the stage of sagehood will be like. Thus from the start in his mind he puts success ahead of effort. (…) If every day we compare ourselves with others this way or that way, it will not do. (…) If one first sets up a target, he will surely get into the trouble of aiming too high or trying short cuts. (p. 70)

'In learning', Zhu Xi says in the *Further Reflections on Things at Hand*, 'do not reach for the clouds or overextend yourself. Simply examine words and deeds, and there is your reality' (Chu Hsi 1991, S.74). Ambition and uptightness seem to be regarded as the enemies of true learning. The intention or even obsession to attain the goal of sagacity seems to be the perfect way to miss the (implicit) goal.

> In the pursuit of learning, if one's intention is first of all toward accomplishment, he will hurt his learning. With that intention, he will try to bore through things in violation of principle and to make up things, thus leading to a lot of trouble. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 106, [1967, p. 85])

And:

> The student must devote himself to reality. He should not be attracted to fame. If he has any desire for fame, he is insincere. The great foundation is already lost. What is there to be learned? Although devotion to fame and devotion to profit differ in the degree of impurity, their selfish motivation is the same. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 62, [1967, p. 67])

One must move on step by step. This pedagogical insight is so important to Zhu Xi that his work is called 'Chin-ssu lu', meaning something like 'reflections on things at hand': 'Question: What is meant by reflection on things at hand? Answer: To extend the basis of similarity in kind' (Chin-ssu lu, III, 14, [1967, p. 94]).

There is a multifaceted history to tell about developing the canonized work in Confucian thinking and about its transformations—'de-canonizations' and 're-canonizations'. The shift veers away from the *Five Classics*[4] to the *Four Books* in the Song period, a shift which represents a move toward inwardness (cf. Gardener, 2007, p. xxii). Zhu Xi (Zhu Xi) as earlier Song literati was mainly interested and attracted to the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and *Maintaining Perfect Balance* (p. xxiii). A 'number of the greatest Confucian literati of the Song not only counted Buddhists among their close acquaintances but themselves had studied Buddhist teachings' (…) 'They were poised for the shift inward' (ibid.). It is a shift from topics of community and governance to more general matters of human nature. Could one call it an anthropological turn?[5]

Interruption: The Turn to Inwardness (East and West …)

Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) promoted Yan Hui as the true student of Confucius (Hon, 2010, p. 13). By doing this, Zhou 'redefined learning as an individual quest for cultivating the mind', argued Hon (2010). This turn is also found in ancient Greek philosophy, especially Platonic thinking (Platon, 1993, 1996) and the concept of 'care for the self' (Foucault, 1993; Hadot, 1981, 1996), and in neo-humanistic philosophy (Humboldt, 1969). Both the Confucian and the Platonic turns to inwardness started from a political context, the context of human action. As Hon explains:

> A learned person, then, is not just a person of action. He is also a person of the right mind who recognizes the inherent connections among all beings in this universe. This 'inward turning is to make cultivation of the heart/mind the most important part of human learning. (Hon, 2010, p. 13)

This ideal is also found in the humanistic notion of self-cultivation and self-transformation, for which Wilhelm von Humboldt used the (originally pietistic and theological) term *Bildung* (Koller, 1999; Kühne, 1976). It is therefore *not* a German specialty or exclusivity, of course (as is sometimes stated in the educational and cultural discourse, especially in Germany [see e.g. Bollenbeck, 1996]). However, one might not exaggerate to state that the ideal of *self-cultivation* is a most elaborated and sophisticated Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought (Wei-ming, 1979), whereas the concept of the *self* is much articulated and differentiated in humanistic tradition (Taylor, 1989).

The German concept of *Bildung* 'refers to the inner development of the individual, a process of fulfillment through education and knowledge, in effect a secular search for perfection, representing progress and refinement in both knowledge and moral terms, an amalgam of wisdom and self-realization' (Watson, 2010, pp. 53–54). It may be important to consider that the German Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) came later in history than the French, English, and Scottish Enlightenment. The German *Aufklärer*

—'men of Enlightenment'—could borrow from their neighbors and their earlier achievements, and they 'did so selectively, to address problems of specific concern in German intellectual life' (Watson, 2010, p. 69).

Enlightenment thought, in general, was characterized by the rise of historicism. Whereas the idea of societal change was widely accepted in late-seventeenth century and early eighteenth century Europe, the German Enlightenment focused specifically on the direction, logic, and meaningfulness of change. Initially, German intellectuals were fascinated by the French Revolution, though later disgusted by the post-revolutionary terror. This was a remarkable backlash to their hope for political progress. Without oversimplifying things, one may state that the main difference between the French and German Enlightenment is a differing understanding of freedom due to the varying historic experiences before and after the French revolution. Whereas in the early Western Enlightenment period freedom was understood as an outward, definitely political concept, in the later German Enlightenment the predominant understanding of freedom was characterized by rather an esthetic dimension: not outward but internal freedom. Even the concept of the so-called *Bildungsstaat* ('state/nation of *Bildung*') as proposed by historicist *Aufklärer*, was mainly an esthetic idea—'a state whose main ideal was to enrich the inner life of man' (Watson, 2010, p. 77). For Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Bildung* as 'education through the humanities' was 'the true path to inner freedom' (p. 832).

The shift from a political understanding of Enlightenment—like in France, England, and Scotland—to German *inwardness* ('*Innerlichkeit*'), as realized by the concept of *Bildung*, can be interpreted—at least to a certain degree—as a desire of German intellectuals to escape from a brutal and on the whole disappointing post-revolutionary world to a place where man could seek secular perfection: an escape toward inwardness. Therefore, the German concept of humanist *Bildung* can be criticized as an apolitical ideal in a discourse environment where questions and topics of political rights, social justice, and societal change were increasingly neglected. That might be one reason why in history humanist *Bildung* became entangled later in Germany with political conservatism and social snobbery (Watson, 2010, p. 834).[6]

The Effort and Imposition of Studying

The study of the *Four Books* for boys and young men was surely 'arduous and not necessarily intellectually challenging or stimulating'. Most of the time was probably spent in rote memorization (Gardener, 2007, p. xiii). This was surely necessary in order to succeed in the first stage of civil service examinations, at the district level, and to move on to an examination in the provincial capital, and then, after success there, being qualified to participate at a set of examinations in the imperial capital. The Four Books 'were considered sacred texts, for they were the direct words and teachings of the great sages of antiquity, men whose exemplary wisdom and virtues served as an eternal model for the ages' (Gardener, 2007, p. xv). Therefore, one must consider the significance of these books as of the Bible in the West, its 'passages, lines, and terms (…) became part of the *lingua franca* in China' (ibid.).

Even though examination candidates were expected for hundreds of years (at least from 1300 to 1900) to demonstrate their mastery of the *Four Books*—the *Great Learning*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and *Maintaining Perfect Balance*, as well as Zhu Xi's comments on them, we must think of their performances as the results of hard rote-learning efforts.

Of course, one will find many passages in the *Chin-ssu lu* which suggest that memorization is maybe necessary but not enough. At the center of educational progress and perfection lies pre-occupation with the not yet known:

> We must try to know what we do not yet know, and to correct what is not good in us, however little. This is the improvement of our moral nature. In studying books, search for moral principles. In compiling books, appreciate what ultimate purposes they have. Do not just copy them. In addition, know much about words and deeds of former sages and worthies. This is the improvement of our inquiry and study. Do not relax for a moment. Keep on like this for three years, and there will be progress. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 94, [1967, p. 83])

There have been curricular debates, and the specialist can reconstruct rather precisely which contents were regarded as valuable, improper, or even dangerous during the very many periods of Confucian thinking:

> The learning of the ancients consisted of only one thing, whereas the learning of today consists of three things, not including the heterodoxial doctrines [meaning Buddhism and Taoism]. The first is literacy composition; the second, textual criticism; and the third, Confucianism. If one wishes to advance toward the Way, nothing other than Confucianism will do. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 56, [1967, p. 63])

To a large extent, the passages on learning in the *Chin-ssu lu* are about the right attitude of successful learning, the ethos of learning which includes the learner's confidence, equability, persistence, and, most of all, modesty. The latter can be experienced in the willingness to learn from people with socially inferior status.

> Many people think they are mature and experienced and therefore are not willing to learn from their inferiors. Consequently they remain ignorant all their lives. Some people regard themselves as the first ones to know moral principles and for them there is no such thing as ignorance. Consequently they too are not willing to learn from inferiors. Because they are never willing to learn, they think of many things that deceive themselves and others. They are willing to remain ignorant throughout their lives. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 98, [1967, p. 94])

Thinking of oneself as being mature and experienced will be an obstacle for learning and therefore for moving on in personal development. Even though the ethos of learning is about moving on step by step, about not being too eager or ambitious, the proper learner learns *as if* he or she would want to become a sage.

> Only when people have the will to seek to become sages can we study together with them. Only when they can study and think carefully can we proceed with them toward the Way. Only when they can think with success can we get established in the Way together with them. When they are thoroughly transformed with it, we can then weigh events with them, as to which is standard and which is expedient. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 65, [1967, p. 67])

The obstacles in moving on, the difficulties in life, are the essential materials for the possibility of self-transformation. *The Chin-ssu lu* can be regarded as a very early if not the earliest document to understand the importance of *discontinuity* in learning and the role of discontinuity for personal development.[7]

> Difficulties improve a person because they help him discriminate moral values carefully and they make his sensitivity greater. This is why Mencius said, 'Men who have the wisdom of virtues and the knowledge of skill are always found to have experienced great difficulties. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 87, [1967, p. 76])

Great difficulties, also smaller difficulties, of course, put a person in a 'disequilibrium' (Piaget, 1957), at least in some 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957); it is striking how differentiated the insights into these problems and their potential for personal development are expressed in *the Chin-ssu lu*. Willingness and effort to find equilibrium requires an antecedent state of problem or disequilibrium, of uncertainty and of a need for a change.

> Before one makes up his mind, the trouble is that he has too many ideas and is uncertain. After he has made up his mind, the trouble is that his study and cultivation are not refined. Thoughts of study and of cultivation are all matters of learning. Pursue it diligently. Why get tired of it? One must lose no time in seeking what is desirable in order to get his mind established in a position of certainty. Then he can go ahead easily like a river bursting forth. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 92, [1967, p. 82])

However, the most striking insights Western readers can take from the lecture of the Chin-ssu lu—at least to me—is something which seems so fundamental and obvious that it has been underestimated and indeed almost forgotten in today's pedagogical and didactical theories: learning is a social matter, not purely individual. The learner needs another person who shows him something, be it intended or not. The cultivation of the self is a social matter. Here, it seems, that the Socratic or Platonic idea of *care for the self* and the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation seem to share a common ground; let me say, an amazingly common ground:

> In one's words there should be something to teach others. In one's activities there should be something to serve as a model for others. In the morning something should be done. In the evening something should be realized. At every moment something should be nourished. And in every instant something should be preserved. (Chin-ssu lu, II, 88, [1967, p. 76])

Closing Remarks: Reading the Chin-ssu lu with a 'Western Eye'

Some familiarity with the discourse of *Bildung* offers opportunities to detect and recognize crucial questions and ideas on the importance of learning in the cultivation of the self as presented in the *Chin-ssu lu*. During the course of the past two centuries, there has been a considerable change in the concept of Bildung within the connotational field (Hörster, 1995). Yet the genealogical origins of the concept mentioned above are in medieval mysticism and pietistic theology. Whereas *Bildung* in the eighteenth century was closely connected with the idea of 'humanity' and 'perfection' (concepts such as Enlightenment, bringing virtue and spirit together by the idea of *Bildung*), at the end of the nineteenth century *Bildung* became understood as a commodity and a value. Since the mid-twentieth century, during the course of establishing the social sciences in the broad educational discourse, there have been attempts to replace the concept of *Bildung* by concepts such as deculturation, socialization, ego-identity, development, and qualification. Thus, the concept of *Bildung* also experienced periods of trivialization and sometimes complete transformation.

The ambiguity and vulnerability of the (original) concept of *Bildung* have nevertheless not resulted in the idea of *Bildung* having satisfyingly been replaced by surrogates as suggested by different sides (Pleines, 1989, p. 1). Pleines (1971) suggested that an attempt to systematize the educational meaning of the *Bildung* concept is still convincing today. He knows fully well that a 'premature determination of its meaning or a structural reduction of its original meaning will result in its decline and thus in the leveling of its originally intended contents' (p. 12). Pleines refers to (1) '*Bildung* as a valuable commodity which must be strived for', (2) '*Bildung* as a state of mind', (3) '*Bildung* as a process of mind', (4) '*Bildung* as a permanent task', (5) '*Bildung* as man's self-fulfillment in freedom', and finally pointing out to (6) 'educated (*gebildet*) man and his/her *Bildung* of reason and heart' (see pp. 12–38).

The reader of the *Chin-ssu lu* will detect all these aspects (or comparable ideas, at least) in this grand collection of texts. The cultivated individual, the learner striving for self-cultivation, is—in the Confucian tradition—considered as a unity. It might easily be overseen that the idea of *Bildung* is not an analytical notion (at least in its origins), but rather—and similar to the (Neo-) Confucian idea of self-cultivation—Bildung is originally regarded as *mediator* between the 'unity of the individual' and the 'totality of the world' (Posner, 1988, p. 26). This mediation is either viewed as a process, a state (or goal), or both. The ideals of educational objectives even in today's discourses (such as responsibility, independence, self-determination, reasonable practice, etc.) thus provide the concept of *Bildung* with its 'typical dignity' and make it a regulative idea of general education and educational theory with 'a place of normative understanding within it' (Miller-Kipp, 1992, pp. 18–19). The constitutive core of the *Bildung* idea seems so close to the Confucian ideal of the person learning to care for oneself on his or her own. In whichever way the term of *Bildung* is used (as a critical term for judging practical work or as an 'uncritical' term which can be ideologized and used), what remains as the actual point of reference of the *Bildung* concept is the subject as a *self-educating individual* or an individual under education. Hence, the 'idea of the subject' becomes the 'systematic core of the concept of *Bildung*, and the

question of the subject in the process of *Bildung* is the fundamental question of *Bildung*' (ibid. p. 19). Thus, educational theory cannot avoid questions concerning the subject's constitution—not only in the philosophical sense but also in the psychological and sociological one.

Despite the 'blurred' definition of *Bildung*, as a 'universal topic'—if we knew what that is, after all—*Bildung* (at least in the German-speaking world)—will stay 'up to date' as long as humans are supposed to be supported and assisted on their way toward some version of the ideal of self-formation. This also implies certain anthropologic presumptions. The ontological and normative definitions of understanding oneself and the world will be up to date as long as people consider themselves as 'self-interpreting animals' (Taylor, 1985) or self-interpreting creatures (Fink, 1970, p. 193). Any concept of *Bildung*—or self-cultivation—necessarily transports or reflects the world views of and images of man. Educational concepts have always been and are still influenced by the predominant political and cultural situation, which may result in rather a euphoric and/or elitist educational discourse. For instance, identifying *Bildung* with a narrow concept of culture, as was common among the German bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, understanding it as being different from everyday matters and civilization, resulted in perceiving a huge gap between '*Gebildeten*' (educated people) and '*Ungebildeten*' (uneducated people) or '*Volk*' (the lower classes) (Hörster, 1995, pp. 46f).

In mass societies, actually just a few individuals can become educated i.e. according to the ideals of Greek antiquity. It may be that educational capital understood in this sense will not have any 'equalizing' effect on given social structures if 'equalization' is its essential topic. Despite any individual acquisition of education, the unequal distribution of educational capital or unequal access to education will result in an analogous division along with differentiation lines. Thus, the link will occur by subtle and less subtle practices of exclusion—as we find in the fields of economic and social capital (see Bourdieu, 1988).

The Western reader of *the Chin-ssu lu* may try to reconstruct or interpret the *Chin-ssu lu* as a theory of *readiness to learn* (in the German tradition called *Bildsamkeit*, cf. Kühne, 1976). This may be considered a natural pattern. However, this motivational condition must be *cultivated*: significant educational efforts will usually aim at self-education (*Bildung*). Learning is the most important feature of self-cultivation—this can be regarded in the Chin-ssu lu as the crucial intuition of *implicit virtue ethics*.

Learning as self-cultivation and care for the self may be considered a *meta*-virtue: the virtue to become virtuous or a better person. This fundamental human motivation seems to be highly recognized in most cultures—for it appears to be the only way to escape from indifference, apathy, and despair prevalent in education culture today (Chin-ssu lu, II, 55, [1967, p. 63]).

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Notes

1. Edited in German by Wolfgang Ommerborn (2008).
2. To give one example: 'In Western philosophy, the question of "What is the Truth?" has taken a center stage. However, to the Confucian cultures, this question does not occupy a central position. The concept of truth is understood differently between the Western and the Confucian world. In the West, truth is knowledge of reality, basically representations of the world' (Kim, 2004, 118).
3. 'If a person is essentially sharp-witted but does not study, then he is really not sharp-witted' (Chu Hsi 1991, p. 93).
4. The *Classic of Changes* (early cosmological views), the *Book of Odes* (a compilation of over 300 odes, folk songs, ballads, court poetry, dynastic hymns …), the *Book of History* (a collection of documents, speeches, and pronouncements on the theme of governance), the *Book of Rites* (a compendium of rituals and rules of etiquette), and the *Spring and Autumn Annuals* (a chronicle of events in the state of Lu, the native state of Confucius).
5. Without any doubt there is *positive pedagogical anthropology* in Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought: 'Know that human nature is originally good and hold with loyalty and faithfulness as fundamental. This is the way to build up, first of all, the noble part of your nature' (Chin-ssu lu, II, 70, [1967, p. 68]). The idea of the good nature of all human beings is, nevertheless, embedded in rather strict conceptions of social conventions. The importance of good relationships and sensitivity toward status distinctions is crucial: father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, old and young, and friend and friend, according to Mencius, had become the five paradigmatic relationships binding Chinese society together. In this context, Daniel Gardener has commented or guessed: 'Perhaps because goodness is relationship dependent, Confucius himself, although deeply preoccupied with virtue, never provides a comprehensive definition of it' (Gardener, 2007, p. 140).
6. The notion of *Bildung* does not however only refer to the process—as the formation or development of a person—but also to the result, the 'final shape'. *Bildung* is said to have an 'objective' and a subjective aspect. Whereas the former refers to 'culture' (as a philosophical, scientific, esthetic, moral, in short: 'reasonable' interpretation of the world, either referred to as *Allgemeine Menschenbildung* [general human education] or as *Allgemeinbildung* [broad educational experience]), the latter refers to the specific way of acquiring the objective content of culture in each case (ibid.). To that extent, we may say that what groups of humans perceive as culture (ethnicities, nations, communities, etc.) is *Bildung* at the level of the individual (von Hentig, 1985, p. 206).
7. This insight will become popular with the Piaget tradition in psychology and pedagogy, earlier in the work of Herbart, later Dewey (cf. English, 2013).

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